DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 796 RC 014 100

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TITLE	Relationship of State Departments of Education with Rural Schools. Rural Education Fact Sheet.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Sep 82
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Agency Role; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Responsibility; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *State Departments of Education; *State School District Relationship; Statewide Planning
IDENTIFIERS	Fact Sheets; PF Project

ABSTRACT

The role of state departments of education in rural education involves responsibilities, leadership, funding, regional assistance, and preparing for the future. It is the responsibility of the state department to act as a regulatory, governing, and operating agency and to distribute federal funds to areas of need. The state department can provide leadership by developing a coordinated program for rural schools. Funding inequities are a frequent difficulty for rural schools; there must be a plan for avoiding this problem. Regional assistance can be provided by a network of regional service centers. In the future, state departments will need to provide guidance for long-range planning and materials development and they will need to have plans for implementing technological and instructional innovations. (DC)

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RELATIONSHIP OF STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION WITH RURAL SCHOOLS

Rural Education Fact Sheet

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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September, 1982

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RURAL EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

RELATIONSHIP OF STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION WITH RURAL SCHOOLS

1. WHAT ARE STATE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RURAL EDUCATION?

Over the years, state agencies have gradually lost their grasp on educational responsibilities. This has been caused, in part, by federally funded and controlled educational programs which have eroded state educational initiative as well as responsibility. States, however, were appointed the guardians of the educational process, and they should retain the responsibility for coordinating all educational programs and activities within their borders. Today, states are reclaiming their responsibility for education.

State departments of education must perform two major functions if our system of public education is to survive: they must act as regulatory agencies and also as governing and operating agencies. The state must engage in educational planning, experimentation and innovation in order to ensure quality programs throughout the state. To accomplish this, state departments of education need to establish basic educational standards, provide needed financial assistance, and ensure continuation of primary control of educational programs by local agencies who can best identify local needs.

State departments of education should also play a major role in distributing federal funds to areas of need. This can be achieved, with optimum results, by developing a cooperative program involving federal, state and local agencies, with each performing the functions for which it is best suited. The small schools effort in Oregon is a fine example of this.

Oregon offers its small and rural schools many services through the combined efforts of the State Department of Education, Small Schools Advisory Committee, Oregon Small Schools Association, and other educational departments and agencies.

A Small Schools Specialist, operating through the State Department of Education, is responsible for coordination of the state's small school effort. As executive secretary to both the Small Schools Advisory Committee and the Oregon Small Schools Association, the specialist is able to make State Department of Education staff aware of the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of small and rural schools.

The Small Schools Advisory Committee (SSAC) provides statewide representation for Oregon's small and rural schools. The Committee acts as advisor to the Small Schools Specialist and also to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. SSAC's goals are to obtain assistance from the State Department of Education and other agencies in order to meet the needs of small schools; to provide field service; to act as liaison between the schools and the State Department of Education; and to provide programs and activities specially designed for small and rural schools.

The Oregon Small Schools Association (OSSA) is an entirely separate, non-profit organization of the small schools themselves. OSSA's purpose is to assist member schools in setting and achieving goals; to improve communication at all levels; and to develop and institute programs which will improve instruction at its member schools. The Association's Board of Directors acts as a liaison to colleges, universities, and all professional educational associations.

Because of this concentrated effort, recognition and consideration for Oregon's rural and small schools is being attained.

2. WHAT LEADERSHIP ROLE CAN A STATE DEPARMENT OF EDUCATION PLAY?

It is especially important for rural schools to invest wisely in educational products. In order to make such an investment, rural schools need to identify the most productive educational services and programs available. The first step in such a process is to diagnose the present position. It is at this point that state departments of education can assist rural schools in developing a coordinated program of self-study which will identify not only strengths and weaknesses in the present programs, but will also identify future needs in order to ensure a continued quality educational experience.

The Arkansas Department of Education's solution to this problem was the development of ERMA (Educational Renewal Model for Arkansas), a three-part, interactive system for school improvement. Under ERMA, the local school district commits itself to participation in the program. Councils and committees made up of faculty and community members evaluate the current situation, set goals for improvement, and devise methods to acheive their goals. The school district is assisted by a linker, composed of field facilitators, project directors and consultants, who aids in defining problems and who connects the local district with resources at the state level. The State Department of Education acts as the resource base. It is responsible for locating and channeling needed resources through the linker to the local district.

ERMA is a successful program. Communication between school districts and the State Department of Eudcation has improved, local districts have become more creative in problem-solving, and staffs in the renewal districts are using information and research more effectively.

State departments of education must provide strong leadership, and at the same time, respect the local school district's ability to pinpoint problem areas and make valid decisions about change.

3. HOW CAN FUNDING FOR SMALL AND/OR ISOLATED RURAL SCHOOLS BE REVISED OR INITIATED?

Rural schools have frequently been confronted by funding inequities which have adversely affected the quality of education. It is important that state departments of education be aware of these situations and maintain some plan to assist affected districts.

In order to enchance the quality of programs offered in rural schools, 28 states have instituted rural funding programs. These special funding plans usually fall into one of three broad categories. The first, minimum support levels, ensures that schools with very low enrollments will be granted more funding than they would have earned under regular funding formulas. The second, added weightings for basic support, gives extra assistance to small or isolated schools by finding creative ways to increase the basic support area. Items that state departments of education are using for extra weightings range from specific formulas for rural schools or providing weightings for "bonus pupils", to basing support on state eligibility criteria. Finally, provisions are made in some states for special financial grants or allowances to small and/or isolated schools.

4. HOW CAN STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION PROVIDE ADDITIONAL REGIONAL HELP?

State departments of education can provide additional guidance to small or isolated schools by encouraging a network of regional service centers. Regional service centers can be made more aware of the needs of local schools within each region; they can encourage and assist in the development of shared service programs, especially in areas such as special education or the use of instructional media. Without such regional assistance, geographically isolated pupils might not be exposed to such educational opportunities. An example of this can be seen in Texas.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) maintains 20 Education Service Centers throughout the state. Because distance is a major problem in the delivery of services, each center is located relatively close to the school district it serves. Each center offers a variety of assistance including planning for school accreditation, inservice education, textbook display, curriculum assistance and regional planning meetings. In this way, the more immediate problems of Texas rural and small schools are quickly and efficiently handled.

Regional service centers can aid rural schools in planning and evaluation efforts. They can assist small schools in developing and implementing needed inservice training to upgrade the competence of professional staff, and they can introduce educational innovations. Regional service centers can also act as liaisons with colleges and universities to facilitate the development, placement and retention of qualified instructional personnel in each region.

5. WHAT ROLE WILL STATE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION PLAY IN THE FUTURE?

Our rapidly changing society will continue to have an impact on the rural school, no matter how small or isolated the school may be. Changing technologies, educational innovations and increasing services, coupled with spiraling costs, will force an ever expanding role upon state departments of education. They will need to provide guidance for long-range planning and be able to assist schools in developing instructional materials for new programs. State departments of education should develop systematic plans for implementing new technology and instructional innovation in rural schools. Accomplishing such tasks will require that state departments of education provide good fiscal leadership to ensure adequate funding for small or isolated schools. Above all, the state must maintain high quality in its educational programs by the development of performance standards and by a continuous effort to coordinate evaluation at all levels and for all educational programs. The future of state departments of education depends on an increase in all leadership roles.

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